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From prison cell to film set: program offering ex-cons a Hollywood ending

Manifest Works gives film industry training to former inmates. Many have built freelance careers; none has returned to prison

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On a recent Saturday, Richard Williams arrived at Furlined studios in Santa Monica for his 7.30am call time as part of a 12-week film industry training program called Manifest Works.

For each class, the participants play-act on-set positions. That week, Williams's role as producer meant he was tasked with overseeing the talent manager, location manager and their assistants.

In November 2015, Williams was exonerated after serving 17 years of a life sentence for murder and attempted murder. He spent two decades fighting the conviction in prison, while studying Hebrew, Arabic and Latin. He was eventually acquitted due to mistaken witness identification and

official misconduct. The Saturday I met him, he was about to begin his first PA gig on a Los Angeles set later that week.

One of the most common entry points into the entertainment industry is as a production assistant, or PA. The PA might get coffee, run electrical cords, or break down the set; the job's chameleonic nature makes it a behind-the-scenes linchpin. Manifest Works, a not-for-profit based in Los Angeles, ties the hustle of a PA job to its training program for people affected by incarceration, homelessness and foster care. Some participants had been out of prison as little as three months.

Williams spoke softly and deliberately, rocking back and forth in his crisp white sneakers. He applied to the program after an alum recommended him. He was doing security before that. "Not what I wanted to do with my life," he said. "This is giving me an opportunity to pursue something closer to what I wanted for myself."

He still wasn't sure what on-set role he'd like most. "Everybody wants to be the director," he said, knowingly.

California, as the country's most populous state, has one of its highest prison populations, and the highest population of people on probation or parole. It is also home to the multibillion-dollar entertainment industry.

A 2017 study in the *Economic Journal* evaluated the career trajectories of 1.7 million people released from California prisons between 1993 and 2008, and concluded that, while employment curbs recidivism among the released, the quality of opportunities may be more important than the quantity available.

Sixty-three people have completed the Manifest Works program since it began in fall 2014. Many have established steady freelance careers doing production work. No alum has gone back to prison.



Dan Seaver, founder of Manifest Works. Photograph: Dan Seaver

The program was founded by Dan Seaver, a former journalist. In the early 2000s, Seaver answered a Craigslist ad asking for a journalism teacher at Camp David Gonzales, a youth probation camp in Calabasas, California. Years later, he got a former student a job on a commercial set through his spouse, who is a director.

The young man did well on set, Seaver said, but struggled with handling social situations and the minutiae of the job. He later returned to prison.

“I feel like I might have set him up,” Seaver said. “I got him this opportunity where he was making \$1,000 a week, but he doesn’t have the tools to go with it.”

Seaver said he started thinking: “What would it take?”

He originally thought about mentorship opportunities for restaurant and construction work. People I met at Manifest Works currently worked in these industries.

“The thing about Hollywood is that people are interested in that,” Seaver said. “The hard thing is knowing what kind of cheese to order if your boss is French, or what kind of flowers to get.”

Class started promptly at 8am. The cardinal sin of the program - and a set - is tardiness. It’s the main reason people are asked to leave; the group began with 23 people and eventually ended with 15. This day’s class began with a workshop on financial literacy from an accountant who works with freelancers.

“A budget is in some ways a values statement. It’s what you believe, what’s important to you,” said Seaver, who leads each class, acting as the director. “Our United States government has a budget. It shows what we believe in: we believe in prisons and military weapons.”

“At what point do we learn to enjoy the money?” a man named Cornelius Gandy asked. “Because tomorrow ain’t promised.” Since the film industry is essentially a freelance economy, the program emphasizes how to save between jobs.

“I had a long vacation, and in the place I was vacationing, you had to be savvy if you wanted to survive,” Gandy said. “I was like a squirrel. I would stash everything away when it was real plentiful, and then you got an oasis ...”

“Wait, where were you vacationing?” Seaver said, to a laugh from the group. Afterward, the group took a break while Seaver looked over the week’s assignment: menu books participants had prepared for real production companies.

“I outwork everybody and smile more,” said Melvin Jones, a participant in his late 30s who had already worked multiple PA gigs.



Participants of Manifest Works. Photograph: Manifest Works

Jones was incarcerated when he was 15 years old, and released in 2017. In California, since 2014, people who committed crimes as minors can demonstrate suitability for release after serving 15

years of their sentence.

“I didn’t used to always be this way. I used to be an introvert all of my life,” Jones said. “Everyone I’ve met, CEOs, anyone who really elevated their game, they started at the bottom. You start doing the coffee, doing the things nobody wants to do, until someone says, ‘Hey’.”

“You cannot imagine how motivated somebody like that is,” Seaver said about those who attend the program. “Because they never thought they would have a chance. In some ways, that is their greatest asset professionally. Because there is no way that any kid from any film school in the country can ever be as hungry to distinguish themselves.”

Later at the class I attended, the group workshopped their job performances that week, from on-set experiences to networking at parties.

“You’re trying to be the best production designer in the game,” Jones advised a young man who had worked with the art department on several sets, about introducing himself. “You’re trying to express that in two sentences. ‘Hey, I’m excited to meet you - I’ve seen all your work. I’m trying to be the best in the game, but I need to learn from somebody who is at the top of their game.’ Bam.”

At one of the last classes, held at Lionsgate Studios in Santa Monica, I spoke with Williams again. His first daughter was born that week, and he had now worked on two commercials.

“I like being the behind-the-scenes person,” he said. “But I do like the opportunity to be recognized. Now it’s just me coming out of my shell.”

At his favorite class since we first met, a psychologist guest speaker did a workshop about how to use story maps. Williams pulled out a folded-up piece of paper from his backpack to show me. “I kept this with me ever since,” he said. It was a diagram charting his life so far: his youth, his trial, his incarceration, his release and his present in Manifest Works.

I asked if he knew what his dream job would be now. “Scriptwriter,” he said matter-of-factly. “I have a lot of stories.” When asked about his own story, he summed it up: “The hero’s journey.”

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